United Nations E/CN.3/2002/2

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
4 December 2001

Original: English

Statistical Commission
Thirty-third session
5–8 March 2002
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Demographic and social statistics: population and housing censuses

Review of the 2000 World Population and Housing Census Programme and proposed plans of the United Nations Statistics Division for the next census decade (2005-2014)

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted to the Statistical Commission in accordance with a request of the Commission at its thirty-second session.** It reviews the important issues that arose during the 2000 World Population and Housing Census Programme and proposes activities that could be undertaken by the United Nations Statistics Division to enhance the successful implementation of the 2010 world population and housing census programme (2005-2014). Points for discussion by the Commission are contained in paragraphs 19 and 20.

* E/CN.3/2002/1.

** See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2001, Supplement No. 4* (E/2001/24), chap. I, sect. A.

01-68199 (E) 211201

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I. Background

1. At its twenty-eighth session, the Statistical Commission endorsed the 2000 World Population and Housing Census Programme, including the production of necessary handbooks and training materials.[1] Subsequently, the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution, inter alia, urged member States to carry out population and housing censuses during the period 1995-2004, taking into account international and regional recommendations relating to population and housing censuses and giving attention to advance planning and timely dissemination of census results.

2. In response to the above-mentioned resolution, the United Nations Statistics Division revised the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, following consultations with countries, and produced three handbooks (see annex). Technical assistance in the form of international, regional and subregional training workshops and direct advice on various issues related to population and housing censuses in individual countries was undertaken under the United Nations regular programme of technical cooperation, with the assistance of and additional funding from the United Nations Population Fund and from United Nations development account projects. International assistance to countries in census-taking is a long-term commitment, covering activities ranging from ascertaining country needs and developing technical materials to addressing emerging issues and providing technical assistance through training programmes at the national, regional and subregional levels.

3. A United Nations symposium on the theme "Global review of the 2000 round of population and housing censuses: mid-decade assessment and future prospects was held in New York from 7 to 10 August 2001. The purpose of the symposium was to identify issues and emerging problems from the current round of censuses (1995-2004) and seek solutions that would serve to guide census planning during the next round (2005-2014). The present report briefly reviews proposals made at the symposium (see sect. II), the work undertaken by the United Nations Statistics Division during the 2000 census decade (see annex) and proposals for activities to be undertaken in the coming years (sect. III).

II. Critical issues

4. Emerging issues of particular significance to the successful implementation of census programmes that were identified and highlighted during the above-mentioned symposium include:

(a) Adapting census activities to appropriate and emerging technologies;

(b) Improving census management;

(c) Maximizing the coordinated use of data from censuses, inter-censal household surveys and administrative records;

(d) Developing and maintaining census mapping and geographic information systems (GIS);

(e) Implementing dissemination programmes that maximize the use of census results by concerned stakeholders.

Adapting census activities to appropriate and emerging technologies

5. Information technology is critical in census planning and management, mapping applications, data processing and data dissemination. However, countries sometimes find it difficult to choose appropriate technologies because of lack of trained staff and limited in-house expertise and restricted access to available technologies. As a result, countries may have adopted technologies that are not suitable for given conditions or are in the development phase and have not been properly documented. Moreover, within the country there may be no suitable support available to resolve operational problems and the frequent turnover of staff exacerbates the problem. In some instances, such problems have resulted in excessive delays in the processing and dissemination of census results.

6. In order to ameliorate such situations, countries that took part in the above-mentioned symposium recommended that there is a need to develop and widely circulate technical notes reviewing the adaptation of census operations to available technologies, indicating their advantages and disadvantages and the status of development. Furthermore, for countries to benefit from emerging technologies, it is important that national statistical offices have in-house or easily accessible expertise to select and monitor specific technologies. The expertise

is important for operational use and for monitoring outsourced activities.

Improving census management

7. Nearly all countries have conducted at least one census and have, therefore, accumulated local knowledge about its planning and undertaking. However, due to the wide time gap between censuses, lack of proper recording of experiences and personnel changes, many countries end up planning each census from scratch. Although the United Nations Handbook on Census Management for Population and Housing Censuses provides a comprehensive review of census management issues, including quality assurance and stakeholder involvement, it requires amplification of country experience. It does, however, provide countries with a detailed overview of steps and conditions necessary for conducting a successful census. It has been published in the six official languages of the United Nations.

8. Two important issues that were not treated in the *Handbook* concern the use and management of outside vendors in executing selected census activities and the need to establish a record of national census activities that succeeded and failed. Some census offices are not fully versed in developing and executing such arrangements due to lack of in-house expertise, and therefore find it difficult to monitor and ensure the quality of outputs from outsourced census activities. The absence of institutional memory and methodological reports prevents countries from benefiting from past experience and results in mistakes made during previous censuses being repeated, thus wasting time and resources.

Maximizing the coordinated use of data from censuses, inter-censal household surveys and administrative records

9. The major sources of demographic and social statistics are censuses, household surveys and administrative records. Nearly all countries collect most of their population data from those three sources, although with varying sophistication. Too often, little effort is made to link such data for demographic and social analysis or policy formulation. Better linkages would not only improve the usefulness of available statistics but would avoid duplication of data collection. Indeed, many countries collect a considerable amount of statistics, from different sources, which are rarely fully exploited.

10. A major constraint in fully exploiting data is the lack of coordination and expertise in respect of the agencies involved in each of the three data-collection activities and data users. With the increasing demand on statistical systems to provide timely, policy-relevant and high-quality data, it is important to strengthen the dialogue among data producers and users.

Developing and maintaining census mapping and Geographic Information Systems

11. Maps are one of the most important elements that determine the quality and coverage of a census. Historically, many countries have relied upon ad hoc arrangements to develop those maps. Most of the time, sketch maps of questionable quality are drawn just prior to census enumeration. As a result, the quality and future use of census information for sampling frames is greatly compromised. With the advancement in technology and wider availability of GIS in many countries, there is also a need to develop more permanent mechanisms for the maintenance of enumeration area-level maps. Such arrangements would not only encourage the maintenance of continuously updated maps but would also ensure the accuracy of the sampling frames, and in the long run would reduce future census/survey time and costs.

Implementing dissemination programmes that maximize the use of statistics by concerned stakeholders

12. Too often, countries collect a considerable volume of data, with limited and untimely dissemination. Thus, most of the data remain underutilized. The situation is complicated by the increasing demand for population and housing data in more detailed formats and for small areas. Statistical systems are also under pressure to produce and disseminate required data in a more timely and user-friendly manner. Conventionally, countries have produced a set of paper tabulations. The introduction of new technology and the electronic dissemination of data have raised many challenges and opportunities for statistical and census offices.

13. In many cases, little attention has been paid to census data dissemination strategies at the time of the planning of censuses, and a set of tables has been

produced that census organizations have felt were needed for the wide dissemination of results. Furthermore, problems associated with protecting confidentiality may lead to users being denied access to census data in raw or semi-processed files. Even in countries where users are encouraged to request special tabulations, the availability of requested information may be untimely and relatively costly. Census data, as a result, are not necessarily available for wider use to the extent of their full potential.

14. In recent decades, efforts have been made by census data producers to make census information widely available. The sophistication of data users has resulted in demands for more detailed, well documented, high-quality data at small geographic area levels, including meta data. Notwithstanding that change, however, due to the lack of awareness of available dissemination technologies and trained manpower some countries are finding it difficult to meet the increasing user expectations or demands.

III. Proposed activities of the United Nations Statistics Division for the 2005-2014 population and housing census decade

15. The United Nations Statistics Division anticipates a continuation of the training programmes undertaken in the past to plan and conduct censuses to strengthen national capabilities to undertake census operations. Those undertakings can help to build regional and subregional understanding about census methods, sharing of experience and self-reliance through the exchange of expertise. In recognizing emerging needs, there is a need to conduct targeted workshops, resources permitting, dealing with the issues raised above.

16. In addition, the Division plans, resources permitting, to prepare three handbooks and two technical reports as follows:

(a) A handbook on the collection of data on fertility and mortality in 2002;

(b) A technical report and guide for the collection of economic characteristics in population censuses in 2002;

(c) A handbook on household demographic and social surveys, to be completed by 2003;

(d) A technical report on census evaluation, to be completed in 2005;

(e) A handbook on dissemination, to be completed by 2006.

Each of the above-mentioned handbooks and technical reports would be developed in consultation with national statistical offices, through meetings and workshops, technical missions and correspondence. Upon the completion of each draft, a group of experts would conduct a technical review.

17. Technical advisory services are required to supplement the training workshops as countries begin to plan and implement the censuses of population and housing during the 2005-2014 census decade.

18. Meeting user needs through census products is a challenge to national offices and international organizations. The United Nations *Demographic Yearbook* collects and disseminates data from national population censuses on a variety of topics, such as fertility, mortality, migration, population composition, education, ethnicity, economic characteristics, disability and household characteristics. The *Yearbook* is an important monitoring and dissemination tool for assessing coverage and quality of census data. A review by the United Nations Statistics Division, currently under way, includes consideration of the contents of the *Yearbook* to ensure that it is effectively meeting user needs, methods used by countries to evaluate their census data, and the use of new technology in its preparation, publication and dissemination. The review will cover issues confronted by countries in disseminating data from population and housing censuses, and will serve as an avenue for presenting some of the dissemination and evaluation issues that countries confront.

IV. Points for discussion

19. The Commission may wish to comment on whether the issues raised in paragraphs 4 to 14 above are the correct ones.

20. The Commission may also wish to comment on the proposals contained in paragraphs 15 to 18 above and to:

(a) Indicate its agreement with the specific matters proposed;

(b) Note any additional activities required;

(c) Discard any proposals that may be not feasible or are not considered to be useful;

(d) Set priorities and indicate who might take on additional activities to strengthen national capacities.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1995, Supplement No. 8* (E/1995/28), chap. I, sect. A.

Annex

List of methodological materials

Methodological materials published by the United Nations Secretariat to assist countries in improving their population and housing censuses during the past five years are listed below.

Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 1

Statistical Papers, Series: M, No. 67/Rev.1
Sales No. 98.XVII.8

Handbook on Census Management for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 1

Statistical Papers, Series: F, No. 83/Rev.1
Sales No. 00.XVII.15/Rev.1

Handbook on Geographic Information Systems and Digital Mapping

Statistical Papers, Series: F, No. 79
Sales No. 00. XVII.12

Handbook on Population and Housing Census Editing

Statistical Papers, Series: F, No. 82
Sales No. 00.XVII.9

Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 2

Statistical Papers, Series: M, No. 19/Rev. 2
Sales No. 01.XVII.10

Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1

Statistical Papers, Series: M, No. 58/Rev.1
Sales No. 98.XVII.14